Scorsese on Scorsese

Edited by
Ian Christie and David Thompson
This book is dedicated to the memory of Jacques Ledoux, Curator of the Cinémathèque Royale de Belgique for forty years until his untimely death in 1988: a passionate archivist who believed in the future of cinema as much as in its past; and a rare inspirer of film-makers and film historians alike.
Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore was a complete departure from the male-dominated worlds of Scorsese's autobiographical films. Now he had a budget three times that of Mean Streets, and a script by a writer new to him, Robert Getchell. The story follows a widowed woman on the road in Arizona, travelling with her precocious young son and determined to make a new life for herself as a singer. Conscious of its old-fashioned Hollywood optimism, Scorsese worked with Getchell and the actors on improvisation to give it a sharper edge.

He wanted it to begin like a Douglas Sirk melodrama — although Sirk is not a director to whom he responds emotionally — and then shift into a different world when Alice is suddenly bereaved. The means to achieve this was a highly stylized $85,000 set, seen only in the pre-credits sequence, which portrays the mental landscape of Alice's dreams.

Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore was the first time in my movie career that I was able to build a proper set. It was also the last picture to be shot on the old Columbia sound-stages on Gower Street. We even had the set decorator from Citizen Kane, Darrell Silvera. Russell Metty shot the tests for me — he happened to be on the set. In the opening sequence, showing Alice as a little girl, we tried for a combination of Duel in the Sun and Gone with the Wind in the William Cameron Menzies style of Invaders from Mars. We painted a red sunset that went 180 degrees around the entire stage, and we made up this little girl to look like Dorothy in The Wizard of Oz, to stand in front of this incredible backdrop and sing
‘You’ll Never know’. In a way, the songs that Alice sings are inspired by the old Betty Grable pictures.

It was a challenge for me to work with a young boy who was a non-actor. Things would be happening between him and Ellen Burstyn on the set that would happen again at night between her and her own twelve-year-old son. She would tell me about these things and we’d include them, so the picture was constantly changing. I also enjoyed working with Kris Kristofferson, though at first we kept making each other nervous. In rehearsal he would ask, ‘Where do you want me to stand?’ and I would say, ‘I don’t know.’ Then he’d say, ‘You’ve got to tell me where to stand.’

The poor guy had just done Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid, which I loved, but a lot of people hated. So one day we went off on our own to rehearse and I kidded him, shouted stupid things and loaned around, saying, ‘I look funny in front of you and you look funny in front of me. So what? We’ll look funny in front of each other.’ It broke the tension and after that our relationship was great. I had learned something from him.

Another important idea on Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore was to use women in the crew — Sandy Weintraub was associate producer, Toby Rafelson our art director and Marcia Lucas my editor — to help us be as honest as possible. But we never intended it to be a feminist tract. It was a film about self-responsibility and also about how people make the same mistakes again and again. There was even thought of her getting divorced and running away from her husband at the beginning, but we decided to make it very different, that he died and she was left with no choice.

There was some criticism of the ending, with Burstyn getting the handsome man in the end. But in fact the film doesn’t finish with them, it finishes with Alice and her son walking away and the boy saying she’s smothering him. Maybe Burstyn and Kristofferson would be together for the rest of their lives, but it was going to be rather stormy. There was a key line, when he said about his first wife, ‘She said “I’m leaving”, and I held the door for her.’ I tried to play it so that this was realistic in terms of their relationship: he was obviously holding some things back and it wasn’t going to be pretty when he let them out.